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AUTHOR Gregg, Alison
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ABSTRACT

In 1992, the Australian government decided that all children in Australian schools should have access to an Aboriginal Studies program. New courses were designed to bring about greater community understanding of Aboriginal heritage and history, culture and values, but before the courses could be implemented, schools had to be given access to books and other resources of sufficient accuracy, quality, and relevance to underpin the program. This paper discusses the criteria for selection and the innovative resource evaluation process undertaken by the Aboriginal Studies Project team in Western Australia. Stereotypes were confronted, addressed, and reverted in the selection of resources: (1) Australian Aboriginal communities are not all the same; (2) Australian Aboriginal cultures are not primitive; (3) dreaming stories, based on Aboriginal spiritual heritage, are not the same as fairy stories in other cultures; and (4) Aboriginal stories are not like folk tales--not everyone has the right to tell them. Each resource had to demonstrate an understanding of Aboriginal culture and values; eschew derogatory words and phrases that may have been tolerated in colonial times but are unacceptable today; and had to recognize the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and languages in different parts of the country. Reaching consensus on the questions of negative images of Aboriginal people or lifestyles; acceptable standards for language use; and insistence on Aboriginal authorship proved more problematic than other considerations. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/SWC)

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Political Correctness or Telling It Like It Is: Selecting Books About Australia's Indigenous People for Use in Australian Schools

by
Dr Alison Gregg
School of Information and Library Studies
Curtin University of Technology
Perth, Western Australia

Abstract
In 1992, the Australian government decided that all children in all Australian schools should have access to an Aboriginal Studies program. New courses were designed to bring about greater community understanding of Aboriginal heritage and history, culture and values, but before the courses could be implemented, schools had to be given access to books and other resources of sufficient accuracy, quality and relevance to underpin the program. In this paper, the author reflects on the criteria for selection and the innovative resource evaluation process undertaken by the Aboriginal Studies Project team in Western Australia.

From a viewpoint in Perth, near the extreme southwest corner of Australia, the rest of the world can sometimes seem very far away. Unkind people suggest that it's only fifteen years distant in time. What the UK and the US are doing now, they say, Australians will be doing fifteen years into the future. Of course that's unfair. Granted, we may be a bit slow in some things, but we're right up there with the rest in others. We don't deserve such an unflattering stereotype. We don't like stereotypes applied to us at all. We're individual. We're different, and we'd like you to acknowledge our strengths as well as weaknesses.

Stereotypes are at the heart of this paper. In common with indigenous peoples everywhere, Aboriginal Australians rightly resent the stereotypes that have been built up and are still in use to define indigenous lifestyles and culture. Like teachers and librarians in other parts of the world, Australians working in the field of children's literature have become conscious of the need to promote authentic indigenous writing and illustration, speech patterns and value systems. Australian educators know that self-esteem is as critical to social development and academic achievement for Aboriginal children as it is for all others. Children need to see their own lives reflected in their environment: a school without pictures of Aboriginal families, books without believable Aboriginal characters, teachers without understanding of the traits that contribute to the richness and close nurturing relationships of Aboriginal communities--these all devalue Aboriginal culture and contribute to the bewilderment and sense of loss felt by so many indigenous Australian people. This loss, with its concomitant health, welfare and lifestyle problems, has been reported repeatedly in a variety of settings. Lawyer Rick Sarre, reflecting on the landmark Mabo land rights case in Australia, notes that:

> In the last generation there has developed no shortage of evidence from commission after commission, study after study, that Aboriginal Australians are at vastly greater risk of threat to life, health and liberty than non-Aboriginal Australians... Sadly, there is a mutually reinforcing spiral of welfare, poverty, alcoholism, imprisonment and violence in many Aboriginal communities which is sustained, and will continue to be so, by the feelings of helplessness endemic in the lives of many indigenous Australians. (Sarre 1994, p99)

This is eerily similar to the prognosis for African American, Hispanic American and Native American children given by Virginia Henderson at the Multicolored Mirror: Cultural Substance in Literature for Children and Young Adults Conference in 1991. She cites similar statistics and quotes from the 1987 National Education Association Report on American Indian/Alaskan Native Concerns:

> Enhancing of self concept of Indian students is essential to the effective education of Indian students. Helping students recognize their heritage, giving them a

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sense of belonging, as well as a sense of their uniqueness as Indians, is essential. (And justice for all 1987, p15, cited Henderson 1991, p18)

By the late 1980s, a groundswell of informed international opinion led governments in many countries to make renewed efforts to respect indigenous cultures and to have them embedded in formal education systems. In Australia, the move was spearheaded by the National Aboriginal Education Committee, which led in turn to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Project. By 1992, this consultative group was ready to present a first draft of principles and guidelines for introducing studies of Aboriginal culture for all children in all Australian schools. Within a context that acknowledges the sophistication and complexity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and social structures, the proposed study syllabus--according to the Draft Principles--should lead to better community understanding of the social, cultural, spiritual and language heritage of Aboriginal people, and promote a more accurate, honest and balanced view of Australian history (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Project 1992, p6). For Aboriginal students in particular, the new courses should provide:

- a more supportive school environment;
- enhanced confidence and self-esteem within the school setting;
- improved learning outcomes through the provision of culturally relevant curriculum;
- the development of a stronger cultural identity. (National Aboriginal ... 1992, p6).

With national acceptance of the draft guidelines came the much more complex task of trying to apply them. In my own State, Western Australia, the Education Department set up an Aboriginal Studies Project team to develop, trial, and fine tune an Aboriginal Studies curriculum to be introduced in its first phase to students in the first three years of secondary schooling. I began work with the team at the beginning of 1993.

My brief was to develop a list of resources to support the introduction of the new curriculum in WA schools. I felt both privileged and humbled to be asked to do so. I had last worked closely with an Aboriginal community in the 1960s when, as a mother of preschool children myself, I worked with Aboriginal mothers and other community members to es-tablish the first federally funded preschool for Aboriginal children in WA. Two of the people associated with that committee were now members of the Aboriginal Studies Project team. My job was to support them by recommending books and other resources to help teachers and students gain the best outcome from the new curriculum.

While this sounds simple enough, the task was of necessity extremely complex. This was a new area in curriculum development, fraught with political overtones and the capacity to tread unwarily in sensitive issues beyond my understanding. As a non-Aboriginal teacher librarian with a particular interest in Australian history, I knew the broad outlines of what was required, but I needed to see each topic through the eyes of people who had been dispossessed of their land, whose cultural foundations had in many cases been swept aside as being of no account, and who had survived disruption to their family and community life on a scale largely unimaginable to most non-indigenous Australians. Because of the extreme sensitivity of this work, each book, video or audiotape I selected had to be passed by an advisory panel of Aboriginal Liaison Officers, School Develop-ment Officers, curriculum writers and teachers. I listened to their comments, took detailed notes, and amended my annotations accordingly.

So, when it came to recommending resources, what were we looking for? Inevitably, the first problem was stereotypes. We wanted material that was fresh and authentic, that gave a realistic view of the issues it purported to cover. Above all, it had to be acceptable to Aboriginal community groups throughout WA. So the first stereotype had to be confounded:

1. Australian Aboriginal communities are not all the same

It is amazing that the belief that they are is so widespread. Think about it. Australia is a country that encompasses tropical rain forests, cool rain forests, snow fields, hot des-erts, rocky shorelines, rich agricultural land, spectacular gorges and valleys, grasslands, salt lakes, freshwater trout streams, and claypans. Why would the cultures be the same? The en-vironments are not. Aboriginal cultures always place people in harmony with the land, but the settings--and therefore

the lifestyles--may be very different. To expect all Aboriginal people to be the same and to give a similar response on any issue is just as absurd as expecting all non-indigenous Australians to vote the same way at the next general election; or all thirty-year-olds, for example, to prefer the same dinner menu. And yet some publishers and writers still promulgate the notion that all Aboriginal Australians live the same lifestyle, hold the same beliefs, and act in the same way. Books in international series, e.g. countries, indigenous peoples, often fall into this trap. Indigenous Australians would mostly prefer not to appear at all than to have their culture covered in so erroneous a way. Such books are NOT recom-mended.

2. Australian Aboriginal cultures are not primitive

Because it was believed that Aboriginal people had no centralized system of government, written records, or permanent buildings, many colonial administrators wrote off Aboriginal culture as "primitive" and Aboriginal people as "childlike". In reality, Aboriginal cultures are complex and sophisticated with a recording system based on oral storytelling, dance, ritual and visual art; with complex rules for the good order of society; and with rock carvings, paintings and other constructions to show where Aboriginal groups led rich, full lives before the incident that school texts have commonly referred to as "the coming of the white man" or "settlement". Aboriginal writers call it "the invasion". Even the most cursory investigation into Aboriginal cultures shows a complex system of languages and dialects (perhaps as many as 600; certainly more than 200), rules relating to skin groups and family relationships, rules governing preservation of the environment and nurturing the community. These are the literal ground rules that have allowed Australia's indigenous people to flourish in environments where new arrivals perish. They are not primitive.

3. Dreaming stories are not the same as fairy stories in other cultures

Of all the stereotypes that have grown around Aboriginal beliefs, this is the one most likely to cause the greatest offence. Aboriginal spirituality is real and deep seated. The strength of the "Homelands" movement--the move to return communities to their ancestral lands in order to revive their cultural heritage--shows the importance that Aboriginal groups attach to the ceremonies of their Dreaming. For them, the world is still becoming. Dream time is more than a stage of creation that happened a long time ago. The ceremonies are intimately bound up with the welfare of the communities. There is mounting evidence that young people in particular gain significantly from reconnecting with their community and its cultural practices. A recent (1993) book by Aboriginal Elder David Mowaljarlai exemplifies this deep commitment to the Aboriginal spiritual heritage. As an old man, Mowaljarlai wanted to be sure the Dreaming stories would be passed on and the ceremonies observed. In doing so, he created a dilemma for other communities and for the Aboriginal Studies team. Although the stories were his to tell by right of his position in the community, he included secret/sacred material that should not have been divulged. For this reason, a warning had to be included in the annotation on the recommended resource list:

> Caution: Because some of the words and images in this book are culturally sensitive, the book must be checked carefully by community elders before it is accepted into Kimberley schools. (Aboriginal Studies lower secondary ... 1994, p50)

This is only one of several instances where such warnings were needed. Another was in the annotation for Virginia Hamilton's *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World* (1992). In every respect, bar one, this was an ideal book for inclusion. It is a handsome collection of stories from indigenous cul-tures, beautifully told. Its context shows Dreaming stories as part of a worldwide pat-tern. From a WA perspective, it is unfortunate that the sole Aboriginal story selected contains one word that is unacceptable to some WA communities. In most parts of Australia, this word will cause no offence at all, but when recommending items for WA schools, it is an issue that must be acknowledged and schools must be warned. In fact, the Aboriginal Studies team advises that all resource material dealing with Aboriginal matters should be checked by the local Elders as a matter of course. The issues are too sensitive and too much tied to individual cultures to be covered by a blanket recommendation for all schools in Western Australia, let alone for the whole of Australia.

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4. Aboriginal stories are not like folk tales: not everyone has the right to tell them

There are two issues here: stories that are central to the culture and stories that belong to the people, but are nevertheless personal stories. In both cases, the question is, "Who owns the story?" Aboriginal writer and broadcaster Wayne Coolwell explains the problem:

> A lot of people feel that Aboriginal people are just one people and have one voice. There are about 250 or 300 tribes around this country and I, coming from this area here, would never dare to speak about another Aboriginal group; they are not my tribe and there is an unwritten law that you don't ever get up and speak for other people. (Moloney and Coolwell 1994, p104

Within Aboriginal culture, there is now much resentment that stories that have been shared generously with enquirers have eventually made their way into books; sometimes with attribution, often with none. People who thought they were doing a friend a favor by telling of the old days have been horrified at finding those stories published for all to see. Mourning customs in many Aboriginal communities pre-clude naming the dead or showing their photographs: both strictures have been breached by non-indigenous authors and publishers. Dreaming stories can be told only by those with the right to tell them. Pat Torres, an Aboriginal writer and illustrator committed to building up Aboriginal culture, stresses that she always pays a consultant's fee for gathering material from interviewees (Torres 1994, p12) since personal stories should be treated in the same way as other source material used by researchers and journalists. Aboriginal educator Linda Burney gives a slightly different slant:

> Who owns the information when you give it? ... If you share with someone your life story, and it is used in the gaining of a thesis or a doctorate or whatever, you feel a little bit cheated because it's your story ... When that stuff is shared, does it become the author's or the publisher's because it goes into their book? Or does it remain with the people? ... So much has been taken and used to the benefit of the individual and not to the benefit of that community. (Burney 1992, p86)

Tjarany / Roughtail : the Dreaming of the Roughtail Lizard and other Stories Told by the Kukatja (1993) provides a splendid example of graceful attribution on behalf of, and paying due respect to, the community:

> These are our stories.
> We give permission for Gracie and Lucy and Joe to tell them, so you can share them.
> We hope you enjoy Roughtail.
>
> Kukatja people
> of Malarn, Yaka Yaka
> and Wirrumanu communities
>
> Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture A.G.M.
> Mt Barnett, October 1989.

The evaluation process for the Aboriginal Studies resource list

Each evaluation meeting followed the same format: The accreditation panel met around a large table, each member with a copy of all the annotations I had prepared, and a trolley full of books and videos to assess. Each item was examined, sampled--or read through in its entirety if time permitted--and discussed exhaustively. On most issues the panel was in broad agreement. Each item had to demonstrate an understanding of Aboriginal culture and values; had to eschew derogatory words and phrases that may have been tolerated in colonial times, e.g. "darkie," "lubra" but are quite unacceptable today; and had to recognize the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and languages in different parts of the country. Any book that suggested that Captain Cook discovered Australia was rejected out of hand. Unfortunately, Alan Tucker's splendid *Too many Captain Cooks* (1994) which traces in ironic cartoon form the history of Black/White relations in Australia arrived just too late to be included.

There was little difficulty in reaching consensus on any of these issues, but three other concerns proved more problematic. They were:

- ▲ the question of negative images of Aboriginal people or lifestyles;
- ▲ acceptable standards for language use;
- ▲ insistence on Aboriginal authorship.

1. Negative images of Aboriginal people or lifestyles

This was the aspect that caused most controversy. Should books and videos show less than ideal aspects of Aboriginal lifestyles thereby possibly reinforcing negative stereotypes, or should the selected material show the problem warts and all? Should the recommended list be concerned only with good role models, approved images and acceptable behavior, or should the students, many of whom might never have met an Aboriginal person in their wealthy middle class neighborhoods, discover the realities of life for all too many of their fellow citizens? In the end, the panel opted for a balance. There was no point in painting a picture unrealistically full of sweetness and light, but not much point in stressing only the downside either. Students had to be aware of failures in social policies and relationships in order to build a better framework for the future.

Ironically, this stance led to the exclusion of a book which in all other aspects would have provided excellent resource material for teachers and high ability students. The major thrust of *Aboriginal Health and History: Power and Prejudice in Remote Australia* (Hunter 1993) is the need for a sustained program of health care for Aboriginal people in the far north of WA. It includes a first class introductory chapter detailing the history of Black/White relationships in the area, and traces the increasing incidence of mental and physical disorders to the breakdown of traditional values and cultural practices--just the point the Aboriginal Studies curriculum seeks to highlight. But the panel rejected the book on very practical grounds, "Think how you would feel," they suggested, "if you were the only Aboriginal kid in a room full of white fellas, and you had to read all this about sexually transmitted diseases and alcoholism in Aboriginal communities." Point taken.

2. Language

Problems related to the use of secret/ sacred words and images have been described above, but there are two other aspects of language use that caused problems for the panel. The first relates to the pervasive issue of diversity amongst Aboriginal communities. Jimmy Chi's musical *Bran Nue Dae* became the runaway hit of the 1990 Festival of Perth. Its bouncy, joyous rhythms, exuberant performance and storyline that spoke so closely to Aboriginal experience in WA brought a huge following in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. The script and score were subse-quently published (Chi 1991), a cassette of songs and a video on the making of the musical were released, and the company embarked on a triumphal national tour. In many respects, each of these products fits well within the ambit of Aboriginal Studies. The text realistically reflects Aboriginal lifestyles and the effects of government policies on Aboriginal people; the video and audio cassettes present Aboriginal performers operating with technical expertise, style and panache; the libretto accurately reflects Aboriginal speech patterns; but it includes language that may be unacceptable in many schools. Like James Moloney's young adult novels, it gives Aboriginal characters dialogue that would cause raised eyebrows in less freewheeling communities. The panel had no hesitation in recommending its inclusion, but added that the plentiful use of obscene language may be offensive to many people.

Language problems of a different kind attend the use of Aboriginal English, a Kriol version used widely as a first language in many Aboriginal communities. It has its own grammar, vocabulary and sound system, and has recently been approved for use as a first language in schools where this is appropriate. English will be introduced as a second language when children at these schools have gained confidence and are ready to move on (*The West Australian* 11.3.95). The problem for many panel members is that written Aboriginal English simply looks like incorrect grammar and spelling to those unfamiliar with it. One member explained, "Our kids have a hard enough time learning to spell properly. They don't need to see bad models of writing as well." By and large, the panel rejected books featuring texts in Aboriginal English, but retained some examples where other attributes outweighed the difficulty this presented.

3. Aboriginal authorship

In all instances, the panel favoured Aboriginal authors and illustrators over non-indigenous ones. This does not mean, however, that no non-indigenous authors feature on the recommended list. Where no Aboriginal author had produced a book on a needed topic, the best available work from any source has been in-cluded. The panel was pragmatic in its approach; the list is intended as an aid to teachers and students learning about Aboriginal traditions and culture. Any material that would promote such learning was considered. It was to counter experiences like the one related by Wayne Coolwell that the Aboriginal Studies Project was initiated:

> I went to school in the sixties and the simple fact was that Aboriginal history and culture were not taught. My only connection with Aboriginal culture at school was some old black fella coming in with a boomerang and throwing it around the schoolyard. There were only five or six Aboriginal children in my school ... Aboriginal people have always felt, "Oooh gee, ya know ... Don't talk about Aboriginal culture." (Moloney and Coolwell 1994, p105)

The Aboriginal Studies Project team has worked actively to turn around that perception. By providing accurate, authentic and well-written resource materials, members have sought to restore a pride in being Aboriginal and an understanding of the great traditions and culture of which Aboriginal school students are now the heirs. For the good of the community, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, it is imperative that all Australians gain a greater understanding of Aboriginal heritage and history. As a starting point, the team has sought to influence the teachers and librarians in a position to promote it, and to give them the tools with which to do it.

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